

Sheila Malone, "Vibration: Objects Performing Violence, Queerness, and Transcendence / Dick Hungry Whore," *Lateral* 4 (2015)

https://doi.org/10.25158/L4.1.7

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Issue 4 (2015) — Performance: Circulations and Relations

Vibration: Objects Performing Violence, Queerness, and Transcendence / Dick Hungry Whore

Sheila Malone

ABSTRACT Sheila Malone's work is both digital art piece and critical essay, which explores the queerness and the vibrating machine in light of both recent scholarship on objects and materiality and the author's own work as a performance artist. Malone's art cuts across and questions the divides between highbrow and lowbrow, permanence and ephemerality, the G-rated and the X-rated. The digital installation and accompanying essay understand the space of inbetweenness as a potential site for queer interventions into existing material orders.

[Editor's note: *Gallo Vulgo Esurio Meretrix: or Dick Hungry Whore* can be accessed at www.sheilamalone.com/DHW]

This essay on vibration and vibratory objects works through a phenomenological framework to re-imagine energetic movements. This subsequently informs new methods and modes of orientation toward objects, disrupting previously understood vibrational patterns of lived or sensed experiences. How vibratory objects impact the body and how the body senses these vibratory objects is perhaps central to the idea that vibration is an exchange of power. My aim is to situate the word vibration into a discourse about pleasure, queerness, and the relationship the body has toward objects—toward vibrating machines. This essay is organized into three parts: the phenomenology of the objects of tattooing, the vibration of tattooing, and the queering of the objects that are tattooed.

I arrived at phenomenology through Sara Ahmed's book Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others. Ahmed's polemical tethering to and toward objects of the Other breaks the patrilineal trajectory of phenomenological discourse. In Phenomenology of Perception Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that our perception of objects around us is not static or fixed as it is a field constantly changing from within the body and outside in the world. Merleau-Ponty writes, "Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them" (Merleau-Ponty xi). Ahmed reregisters the voice of the subaltern through her "queering" approach to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Ahmed writes, "A queer phenomenology might turn to phenomenology by asking not only about the concept of orientation in phenomenology, but also about the orientation of phenomenology" (Ahmed 3). Ahmed proceeds to question not just how we arrived at the writing table, but what we turn our back to when we arrive. Ahmed argues, "if phenomenology is to attend to the background, it might do so by giving an account of the conditions of emergence for something, which would not necessarily be available in how that thing presents itself to consciousness" (38). In other words, Ahmed argues for an attention to the "background" of the object we approach or are oriented to through other bodily perception. Ahmed draws from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's transcendental phenomenology in order to register a critique of normative orientations. By using

Merleau-Ponty, Ahmed claims, "If Merleau-Ponty accounts for how things get straightened up, then he also accounts for how things become queer, or how 'the straight' might even depend on 'queer slants'" (106). From Ahmed's attention to the background or to what is backgrounded by orientation versus what is foregrounded or in front of us, I turn to what is undergrounded, or under the surface of objects and bodies. The privileging of the ocular and the visual picture occludes what we cannot see. In order to account for what is underground, other senses are engaged. In drawing from Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed, I want to consider vibrational perception — and our account for the pleasure and pain in our bodily contacts.



The Objects

The recent turn to (or toward) objects is not only a trend in critical theory, it is perhaps an expanded analysis of networks of relationships that already exist, and networks of broken relationships. As Bill Brown in his essay on "Thing Theory" (2001) argues,

We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, how-ever momentarily (4).

Brown draws from Martin Heidegger's object and thing theory put forth in Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, and Thought* (1971). Brown advances Heidegger's exploration of "what in a thing is thingly?" (Heidegger 165), and Vladimir Nabakov's literary approach to the dialectic of "looking through" versus "looking at" in *Transparent Things* (Nabakov 1). By overlaying Heidegger onto Nabokov, Brown discerns how language reveals our relationship to an object and our conception of its objectness or its thingness (Brown 5). Following Heidegger, Brown suggests that "things" are all around us in our everyday life, but it isn't until the thing breaks or becomes a hindrance that we have an acute awareness of its materiality and even meaning. When things are no longer useful or usable their past and non-futurity are foregrounded as the present pierces our momentary reality.

In 2001, Brown edited a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* titled "Things." In this issue art historians, scientists, cultural theorists, and critical theorists came together to put forth what has now been termed new materialism. Since that time, numerous debates about this turn toward object theory have surfaced. At the 2014 American Society for Theatre

Research Conference (themed "What Performs?"), Rebecca Schneider's plenary address cauterized this turn toward objects in her presentation titled "Lithic Liveness and Agential Theatricality." Schneider's concern with new materialism as she presents it is its "ahistoricality, potential essentialism...universalizing and if not anthropomorphizing ... generalized animacy" (Scheider 3). What Schneider fails to address are the productive "returns" of new materialism in particular its application in ecology and other realms of posthuman theory. Timothy Morton in *Hyperobjects* reminds us that object oriented ontology and thing theory allow us to trespass the narrowing affects of continental philosophy and its cumulated anthropocentrism (Morton 22-23).

I enter this discussion or investigation of things or objects and specifically vibratory objects through what Dwight Conquergood designates as a "commingling of analytical and artistic ways of knowing" (2001, 7). My interest in vibration is a result of my phenomenological experiences of tattooing myself as performance art. As such, this essay incorporates performative writing and memory as an equal partner in the analysis and uncovering of vibration and its effect and affect on things. "Vibration," as Shelley Trower defines it in *Senses of Vibration: A History of the Pleasure and Pain of Sound*, "is not itself a material object at all, but it is bound up with materiality: vibration moves material, and moves through material" (6). In the most fundamental sense, vibration, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is wave activity or oscillation. We experience vibration in our daily lives through sound energy, light energy, and even our bodies have various vibratory or oscillating systems (Enns and Trower 2-3).

In 2001, I was sitting in my studio with a box of three hundred oranges, my tattoo guns, tattoo power unit, foot pedal, needles, ink, paper towels, rubbing alcohol, green soap, and a list of words—three hundred words, translated into a fake Latin, arranged in alphabetical order. I began to tattoo in a calligraphic or Old English style—a font type or style that would or could "read" as classical tattoo design or "flash" (Schiffmacher and Riemschneider). This list of words was fabricated through an ethnographic art project I was doing in graduate school. I wanted to conduct a survey within the LGBT community of the types of words that members of this community had heard used against them, the derogatory and crude names. I printed index cards with a question: "What names have you been called?" I visited LGBT bars in the San Francisco Bay area (San Jose and San Francisco) and distributed these "surveys" to the bars' patrons. I collected over one hundred cards with multiple words listed on the cards. As I sorted through the words, I became interested in how certain words and phrases had "coded" meanings. This led me to creating a "visual" system of coding or obscuring the overt meaning of the words through a translation into a faux Latin. Among thAestheticizing Risk in Wartimee first words tattooed were alimonia and then aula: diesel and queenie respectively. I sat in that chair for three days tattooing word after word, activating the constant reciprocation of the needle bar, the tiny needles, piercing over and over into the skins of the oranges, the vibration of the needles changing frequency and velocity as I pressed harder and lighter on the pedal. These oranges were transforming before my eyes, nose and fingers from delectable edibles to leaking bodies.

Slowly and methodically I marked each succulent citrus with a textual identity, an identity in a language of ancient, Western, privileged significance—Latin or a sort of faux Latin. *Gallo Vulgo Esurio Meretrix*: or Dick Hungry Whore (www.sheilamalone.com/DHW) is an art project where I queered little oranges with slang terms. Collecting over three hundred derogatory words aimed at LGBTQ people, I translated each word into a Latin equivalent. While I never studied Latin, one of the intentions of the art project was to relate a low culture—spoken word or vernacular, a spoken vulgarity, to a high cultured written word, creating a taxonomy of queerness and

"dirtiness." What better way to mark, or to im/mortalize the words but to tattoo them onto these little organic orange bodies? The tattoo is "an indelible mark" (Sanders and Vail 60-1). Through the process of marking the oranges with "indelible symbols" I was challenging the dialectical relationship between permanence and ephemerality. Initially conceived as a visual and spatial installation, the project became performative, about the tattooing process, the process of translation, the process of classifying, and the spectacular, sensorial process of rotting that these oranges performed.



Figure 2: Examples of freshly tattooed oranges; "Sperma Regina, Bacula, Volutus Cupidus Meretrix"

Coming to the orange is no accident. The orange and other citrus fruits have been used as a practice substrate for tattoo artists for decades (Alayon). In more recent years, fake or "practice" skin is used, when "real" bodies are unavailable or when citrus fruit does not suffice. The material history of the orange in relationship to tattooing is further complicated by the orange's particular signification in US LGBTQ politics. The orange, while it signifies health, vitamins, sunshine, antidote to scurvy, also holds a deeply rooted past in economic, cultural and political conflict, not exclusive to the US as the orange literally figures in global economies of bodies and information. ¹

The Orange Isn't Just An Orange



Figure 3: Installation view, day 2

The orange is an ancient fruit and well traveled. Its history can be traced through Spanish Colonialism dating back to the 1500s and eventually to genetic mutation experiments of the 19th century and early 20th century in Brazil and the US (Reuther and Webber). The orange as a commodity implicates laboring bodies, fluctuating markets, and global ecologies (Reuther 161). In *Citrus: A History*, Pierre Laszlo points out that the history of the citrus is both mythical, complex, and complicit in the slave trade and the colonization of the "New World." He writes, "The Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors brought plants to be turned into remunerative crops [to California and Florida] (sugarcane, cocoa,

citrus trees, and later on, others, such as cotton and coffee). They also transported slave labor for these plantations" (Laszlo 27). Laszlo also notes that Florida and California have dominated the citrus industry in the United States in terms of cultivation and production since the late 19th century. One of the reasons has to do with the organizing efforts of the citrus farmers and the cooperatives they formed in the 19th century as a way to go up against the railroad companies' high prices charged for transportation of their crops to urban centers (Laszlo 51). Another form of organizing, centering around the citrus industry, occurred in the 1970s in the U.S. Orange growers from Florida ran numerous advertisements on television purporting to grow the best tasting oranges in the world: "The Florida Grown Orange."

Also in the 1970s, Anita Bryant launched a media attack against gay and lesbian people, specifically calling for the recall of a Florida law that protected homosexuals from discrimination. She was the spokesperson for the Florida Citrus Commission, the face of the orange. Anita Bryant's vitriolic speech included saying things like, "If gays are granted rights, next we'll have to give rights to prostitutes and to people who sleep with St. Bernards and to nailbiters" (Jones 37). Gays and Lesbians organized and boycotted orange juice in 1977 (Self 242). Slogans appeared on buttons like "Anita Bryant Sucks Oranges" and "Tell Anita You're Against Discrimination: Vote June 7th." Anita Bryant may have had a nice dose of vitamin C as the face of the orange, but in spewing anti-gay speech she galvanized the resistance of queer bodies (Shilts 299). Thus, the orange absorbed symbolic and cultural meaning attached to LGBT politics of the 1970s. Presented as a particularly important moment in the adhesion of gay rights, in 2002 the San Francisco Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society mounted an exhibition titled "Oranges and Butterflies," referring specifically to the events surrounding the Anita Bryant controversy (Morse). This exhibition featured objects and ephemera such as the previously mentioned political buttons that helped to coalesce the LGBT movement of 1977, and photographs featuring marches against Anita Bryant. The energy of the movement helped to organize networks of LGBT protestors around the United States.



Figure 4: Installation view with visitor, tattooed oranges, day 2.

Vibration

Vibration occurs as a result of disturbance to energy systems. Vibration is wave motion that results from disturbance. Sound, light, and other energies in the physical world travel as waves. Vibrations are understood through sensing bodies when they resonate, when they are heard, seen, felt. We feel vibrations all around us in our daily lives, in the quotidian materiality of the world. As Shelley Trower argues, "[vibration] is not a commodity, or object, or substance" (Trower 6). We think about vibration as related to energy: electro-magnetic, seismic, light, and sound. When energy moves through a substance it travels in waves. Some substances or materials disturb the wave motion; they can absorb, or reflect the energy in varying amounts depending on the substance's

material make up. An obvious example is sound. Its waves change speed when the sound encounters objects or substances with different densities like water, air, rock, or bodies. Potential energy can be described as the energy that occurs as a result of an object's position in a system. A spring is a simple example, or gravitational pull on an object resting on a down hill slope. Potential energy cannot be transferred from one object to another without kinetic energy. Kinetic energy is the energy that is produced through motion and can be transferred from one object to another.

A tattoo artist uses and creates vibration through the application of electricity to the tattoo gun and the pressing of the needles into the skin. The tattoo gun itself uses kinetic and potential energy to move the needles up and down—the gun is a system that uses electricity or direct current (DC) which is applied to two electromagnetic coils. These coils, when electricity is introduced, pull the armature down, also pressing a spring. When the armature moves down it breaks the circuit from the contact screw and the electromagnetic field collapses. The spring releases its energy—moving back to its rest state, and the armature moves back up, reconnecting the circuit to the contact screw, and the entire cycle repeats over and over again at a high speed (Feltman). The vibration created in this system occurs from the moving parts and the transfer of energy. The tattooist uses his or her other hand to feel the vibration of the needles as they enter the skin. Through the different depths of the needles piercing into the skin, the tattooist can determine if the tattoo is successfully penetrating.

Thus, "Vibration" as applied to the notion of tattooing refers to something more than the simple movement of needles up and down. The tattoo gun has potential and kinetic energy. The tattooist uses vibration as a way of reading or sensing accuracy. The vibration is feedback information. This information has the capacity to interrupt material structures and change them. With tattooing, the change that occurs appears to be at the surface, the skin, skin deep, but this is really only relative to what the needle bar's adjustment is. To successfully tattoo, without scarring human skin, the needles need to penetrate the skin to the third layer of epidermis—no deeper (Alayon). Otherwise, scarring occurs and the tattoo can become raised from the skin. Lacking smoothness because of the nature of a scar, this type of tattoo loses clarity and sharpness.

In "Inscriptions of The Self: Reflections on Tattooing and Piercing in Contemporary Euro-America" Susan Benson claims that most tattooees are looking for a way to claim their selfness—a sort of me-ness, as a response to feeling dislocated, dispersed, or unstable. I argue that tattooing is a process of exchanging energy from one object to another including the body; the body can be human, animal, plant, or other and is literally objectified as its materiality is interrupted. Through this interruption by the tattoo needles, the recipient has a sense of her or his density, frailty, stamina, solidness, liquidness, etc. This sense of objectness or as Benson calls it "me-ness" is a separation of mind and body happens through the exchange of vibration—from the needle to the skin.

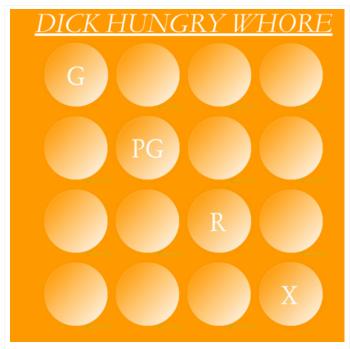


Figure 5: Screenshot from the interface for database: DHW. www.sheilamalone.com/DHW

Phenomenology And The Order of The Chaotic

The things of the world are not simply neutral objects which stand before us for our contemplation. Each one of them symbolises or recalls a particular way of behaving, provoking in us reactions which are either favourable or unfavourable.

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *The World Of Perception* (63)

Through this phenomenological understanding, and specifically focusing on the sensations and perceptions of the bodies that are being pierced, tattooing can be seen as a kind of sub-particle shouting. In other words, the object being tattooed is transformed via the energy exchange, and this exchange is an oscillation. To sense, to feel, to see, to hear and to experience the tattoo is both a process of immanence and transcendence. As the tattooer, there is sensation of vibrations that flow from the vibrating tattoo gun and through the hand. The vibrations also travel from the tattoo gun to the orange and through to the hand. So the machine is an object that produces vibrations and is actually in between two objects, the object being tattooed (the orange), and the object (or hand) that is an extension of the body of the tattooer. The machine is the in-between of two objects, creating a loop of vibrations. Most graphs and illustrations of waves tend to depict the wave-form linearly, with infiniteness implied along particular dimensions. In this process (of tattooing) the graph might look more like a möbius strip, where the vibration falls back into itself. As power is slowed or removed, and the vibration ceases, the graph would turn into a collapsing concentric spiral, that radiates back out, and as soon as the power is turned back on, the looping wave is regenerated and flows. When the wave is at rest, we can call this potential energy, when the particles or matter are activated via motion, the wave is in kinetic mode (Shipman, Wilson, and Higgins 82).

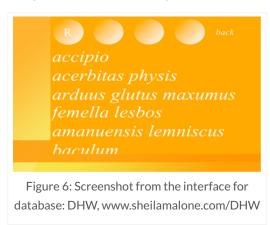
Surrounded by randomness, we are constantly creating conceptual order out of matter on as many levels as we can access. Perhaps at every level of the material world randomness and vibration are forever entwined in a rebellious act. At the atomic level we can conceptualize all of matter as rebelling against the order that humans inevitably impose on it: the real world. When things are random and when they are purposefully out of

order, what does that do to how we interact with objects? Are we always trying to reorder into classifications, categories, taxonomies of life?

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* gives not only an historical account of the social and cultural changes in punishment, but also an understanding of how classification and hierarchical organization produces power relationships through the ranking of objects, bodies, and even space. Foucault writes, "all these serializations formed a permanent grid: confusion was eliminated" (Foucault 145-6). The tattooing process, the moments when the needles pierce the object, are momentary breaks from an ordered existence, from the order of the skin and the order that will inevitably creep back into the picture. As the tattoo image is completed a visual order is restored. Order and chaos live side-by-side, coterminous in the objects and underneath the surface of our sentient life.

Ordering The Oranges: Making Random Meaning

After tattooing three hundred oranges I separated the oranges into four categories based loosely on my interpretation of how the US film industry (Motion Picture Association of America) rates the content of films. I decided to organize the oranges according to four categories of ratings (G, PG, R, and X), all the while asking myself, "Is language so easily rated and ordered?" I attempted to make sense out of the words, phrases, ideas, thinking of how a term was thrown or hurled at someone. Some terms have been so ingrained in LGBT subculture that they might bring a smile to your face, like "Friends of Dorothy," which was given a G-rating, of course. Within each category the oranges were alphabetized. Finding a discrete packet of queerness embodied in a single orange, exhibit visitors could navigate the translations through a computer interface. Using html (hyper text mark up language) and javascript, the interface allowed the English or vernacular speech to sound (out loud) over speakers. The resulting sonic environment became a playful poetic space where a visitor would quickly scroll through words on the computer screen, enacting a performative queering through a cacophony of dirty words. Viewers disrupted normative time and narrative by enacting this dirty poetry, scrolling quickly through the linked text. The oranges invoked an iteration and a hailing of queerness. The oranges didn't care about being hailed. They still rotted.



From the moment the oranges were conceived, their future was written as an organic death. By tattooing each orange, the organic process was expedited, and iconographically marked on each one. The process of breaking the skin of the orange unseals the natural envelope of the fruit, opening the fruit up to a more rapid decay. This rupture of the skin allows microorganisms—the work horses of decay—more opportunity to start this rotting process. In *No Future: Queer Theory and The Death Drive*, Lee Edelman argues against a reproductive futurity. Edelman writes:

If the fate of the queer is to figure the fate that cuts the thread of futurity, if the jouissance, the corrosive enjoyment, intrinsic to queer (non) identity annihilates the fetishistic jouissance that works to consolidate identity by allowing reality to coagulate around its ritual reproduction, then the only oppositional status to which our queerness could ever lead would depend on our taking seriously the place of the death drive. (30)

In other words, to embrace queerness or non-heteronormativity is to not reproduce and to mortify the body—literally. Tattooing, in a sense, then is a process of queering and mortifying the body, the bodies of these oranges.



Figure 7: Installed, tattooed orange Day 9.

Sex, Gender, Rot, Death

Piercing the skin of the orange releases the zest and the oil from the skin; sometimes even a little juice flows out. The smell is intoxicating. As I tattooed over and over again, I noticed that some of the greener oranges smelled different than the riper oranges. The ripe oranges squirted more, and they were easier to tattoo because of being softer. The greener oranges held the lines better as the skin was harder and more dense. Longer words and compound phrases translated into more piercings, more releases, and a faster rotting process. Some of the words tattooed on the oranges were specifically gendered and created certain identifications. One such example was the X-rated phrase anus subtermoveo which I translated from "pooper poker." Another phrase which demonstrated a certain gendering and identification was cista linxi translated from "lick box." As the words wrapped and tugged at the curvatures of the oranges, gendered identities and queernesses slipped into lost meanings. The nonsense Latin eclipsed and masked the marginalizing potential that the spoken word performed. Were the oranges finally free from signification? Sitting on the shelves awaiting their next transformation, the smell of citrus and mold merged into an overwhelming and inevitable queer futurity of death. As the oranges began to rot over the span of two weeks, the smell was replaced with an oddly medicinal aura, slightly reminiscent of penicillin. Each orange rotted in its own completely unique way and at its own rate. This rate of decay varied from what seemed like certain quantifiable factors and other unknown or perhaps random factors. The observed or knowable factors included how much of the tattoo covered the surface of the orange, how large the orange was, and whether or not the orange was green (less ripe) or bright orange (more ripe). Once the oranges started rotting, the change seemed to overtake certain rows of bodies more than other rows. Proximity of the oranges to other oranges sometimes affected the rate of rot, but so did placement within the room of the installation. Some oranges started molding and turning green from the outside. The green powdery mold blanketed the orange like a soft cozy, slowly wrapping itself around the orange's supple curves. The mold was developing an intimate relationship with the body

of the orange. Death and sex seemed intricately connected; the mold was making love to the surface of the orange. Some of the oranges rotted from the inside out. The interiors disappeared, leaving the orange an empty dried skin. The tattoos in these cases remained intact. This loss was almost undetectable, unlike the oranges that slowly became encased in green mold; the oranges that lost their insides were like preserved mummies. They appeared to be the body without soul and without the messiness of life. Each orange experienced vibration as a unique phenomenon in terms of the initial tattoo and the queering of temporality. Vibration of the needles and the vibration of the crafting the tattoo (as this is a combination of the force of the machine and the hand of the tattooist) contribute to how the oranges experience death, decay, mummification, throwing off their thinglyness.



Figure 8: Installation view, tattooed oranges Day 9.

The Orange Is An Orange

The orange is the fruit of the citrus. The orange tree is a self-pollenating tree, which means that it has both male and female flowers. The fruit of the orange tree is what contains its seeds. And these seeds are what is needed for regeneration. Today, many orange trees are grown whose fruit do not contain seeds. Perhaps these oranges embody the ultimate no-future, no seed, no possibility of reproduction. As Jane Bennet argues in *Vibrant Matter* "there is [a] public value in following the scent of a nonhuman, thingly power, the material agency of natural bodies and technological artifacts" (Bennet xiii). The orange and the tattoo gun are objects that potentially (energetically and figuratively) restructure our understanding of queerness, death and pleasure. The orange is a queer body where vibrations, vibrations of the tattoo, liberate the object from its normative signification and ultimately from its own historic materiality. The taxonomies of these queer bodies force them into a state of readability: one understands order, one can control its meaning. But the activity underground, the vibration and the microorganism that we do not see, produces the future we can only desire.

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Notes

Notes

1. Genetic property, migrant labor, economy of bee pollination, just to name a few ways these "things" impact our daily lives — See *Citrus: A History* (2007) by Pierre Laszlo for an exhaustive tracing of the citrus through an historical, economic and cultural lens.

å <u>Bio</u>



Sheila Malone

Sheila Malone researches the intersections of gender, technology, performance and motorcycles. Dr. Malone oversees the Technical Theatre Program at Chaffey College where she is an Associate Professor of Theatre Arts. She received a PhD in Performance Studies and Theatre History from UCLA, and an MFA in Digital Media Arts from CADRE Laboratory for New Media at San Jose State University. She is the managing editor of *The International Journal of Motorcycle Studies*. She has worked for numerous non-profit arts organizations, for-profit and educational theatre companies throughout the Unites States. Her films *San Francisco Dykes on Bikes* and *Annie Sprinkle's Amazing World of Orgasm* have screened all over the world. Her writing has appeared in *The International Journal of Motorcycle Studies, Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association, Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest, Rhizome, Artshift, and Switch.*



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